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ABSTRACT

The booklet offers guidelines to help the educator in making meetings with parents more relaxed and productive, particularly in meeting the needs of special education students. Listed in an introduction are recommendations for productive parent-professional interactions, including that parents should be fully participating members of the team, jargon should be minimized, and parents should be given support and encouragement in coping with the problems and frustrations of raising a handicapped child. Eight basic conference techniques are described and illustrated in the remainder of the booklet: observing, listening, starting the conference, questioning, discussing relevant matters, handling personal questions, maintaining leadership/direction/redirection, and ending the discussion. (SB)

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Teacher's Helper

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TALKING WITH PARENTS

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Teacher's Helper

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SOURCES:

Morgan, W. G., *Skills in Working with Parents,* Unpublished mimeograph, Institute for Research on Exceptional Children, University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana Campus.

Roos, P., *A Parent's View of What Public Education Should Accomplish*. In Sontag, E. (Ed.) *Educational Programming for the Severely and Profoundly Handicapped,* Reston, Virginia: The Council for Exceptional Children, 1977, 72-83.

Introduction

The most important adults in a child's life are that child's parents.* They are critically important in the child's education and, in fact, parent involvement is mandated in the development of an individual program for each child in special education. Effective communication must be developed among the parents, education staff, and related services personnel if effective education is to take place. This helper is designed to help make meetings between parents and education or related service staff more relaxed and more productive.

Roos (1977) offers several recommendations for productive parent-professional interactions.

- Parents should be fully participating members of the team.
- Professionals should develop skills to listen and encourage full disclosures.
- Professionals should share all relevant information with parents.
- Jargon should be minimized.
- Parents often need support and encouragement as they cope with the problems and frustrations of raising a handicapped child.

Professionals should become familiar with some of the following basic conference techniques:

1. Observing
2. Listening
3. Starting the conference
4. Questioning
5. Discussing relevant matters
6. Handling personal questions
7. Leadership/direction/redirection
8. Ending the discussion

**The term parents includes natural parents, foster parents, parent surrogates, relatives, and "interested others."*

INTRODUCTION

The strategies discussed in this helper are only guideposts to help the professional obtain the most information possible during meetings with parents. They are not a substitute for interest, concern, and common courtesy. They are not formula plug-in units but may be helpful in establishing an effective means of communication between parents and professionals.

Everyone has the basic tools and abilities to be skilled in communication techniques. Every effective communicator knows that a bullying manner, a superior manner, and an autocratic manner will insure failure in communication. There is no one style in establishing effective communication. The styles vary as do the personalities involved. Your style should be natural and comfortable for you. Do not underestimate the importance that the parents may place on this relationship with you.

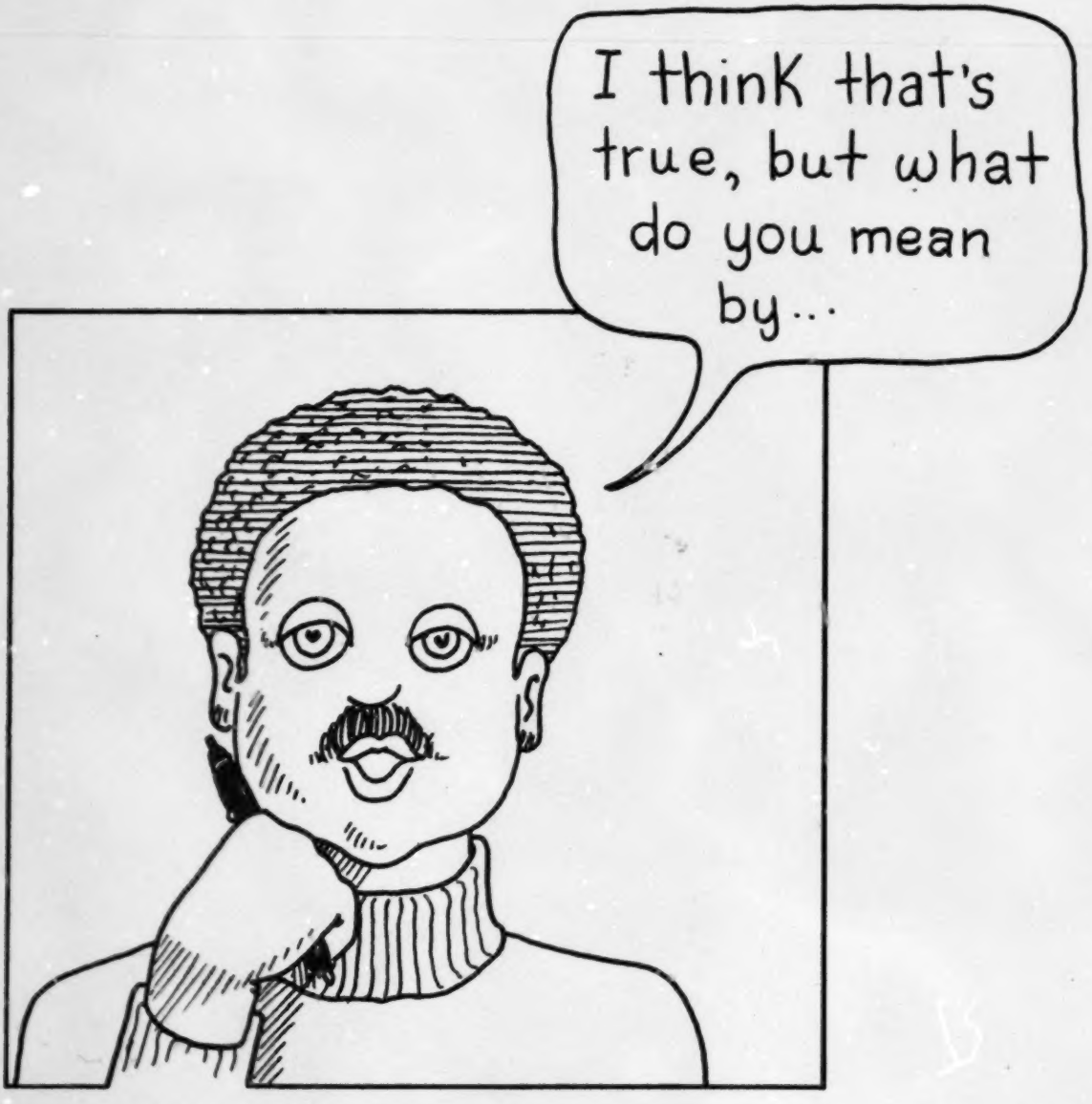
OBSERVING:

Your observation during the discussion will be limited and subjective. You will quite naturally be influenced by past experiences, prejudices, attitudes, training, and environment. To improve observational skills, make a list of things important to observe before the meeting. Three factors are important considerations in improving observational skills.
They are:

1. What the parents say
2. What the parents do not say
3. Body language

OBSERVING:

What the parents say is, of course, important. For effective communication, be certain that you understand what the parents are saying. Do not be afraid or embarrassed to ask for clarification.



OBSERVING:

Another observational skill is to notice what the parents do not say. What the parents obviously avoid in conversation may give you clues to an existing problem. If this problem is not relevant to the situation, do not probe. It may be a problem you or the parents are unable to handle. Try to offer help by suggesting other resources.

OBSERVING:

Much information can be obtained from nonverbal signs and body language. Being cognizant of tenseness, dejection, sadness, or excitability on the part of one or both parents can provide clues to problem areas.

LISTENING:

Good listening is an important skill. At the end of a discussion, you should remember what has been said. Take notes if necessary. Remember, this is not the time to demonstrate your conversational skills. It is a time to listen to what the parents are saying.

LISTENING:

Be an active listener. Do not just sit there, respond with nods or make brief comments to summarize what the parents have said to let them know that you comprehend the meaning of what is being said. This can motivate the parents to provide more information.

LISTENING:

Avoid interrupting the parents as they are talking.

LISTENING:

Many people feel embarrassed about periods of silence. Don't try to fill these periods with needless questions or comments. Silence can be helpful. When parents are silent, they could be thinking through or rethinking the matters being discussed. An interruption at this time consisting of a pointless question or comment may put an end to that line of discussion. Of course, an extended period of silence should be avoided. The length of time will depend on the discussion and will vary with each discussion. When this happens, a facilitating comment may be helpful. These open-ended comments can help the parents to communicate and establish rapport with you. Such comments let the parents know the teacher is empathetic. Such facilitating comments include:

"This is difficult to talk about."
"Parents often feel this way."
"It was a difficult situation."
"This happens in many situations."
"I can see how this could have happened."

STARTING THE CONFERENCE:

After a very brief introductory comment, let the parents speak first. The first step for you is to help the parents relax and feel comfortable. A few friendly remarks followed by a comment that establishes the nature of the discussion is essential. Such comments might be: "Since Jimmy is in my class, I wanted to get to know his parents," or "I thought that you might be able to help me to know Anne better," or "Is there anything that you think might help me to understand Jim better?" Let the parents speak their minds. Listen very closely during this time as the parents state their concerns.*

**At this time it might be helpful to state the approximate length of time the meeting will last if this has not been stated in the initial letter or telephone call establishing the meeting.*

STARTING THE CONFERENCE:

By letting the parents speak first, you have a chance to gauge levels of sophistication. You are given clues as to how to formulate later discussion. Listening first may help to counteract any preconceived ideas you may have about them. Perhaps the most important reason for letting the parents speak first is that you may see the problem from the parents' perspective.

QUESTIONING:

There are only two reasons for questioning the parents. The first is to obtain specifically needed information or to clarify information. Questions such as "I don't understand," are appropriate. The second reason for questioning is to direct the parents to relevant information. Avoid putting answers into the parents' mouths and avoid interrogating them.

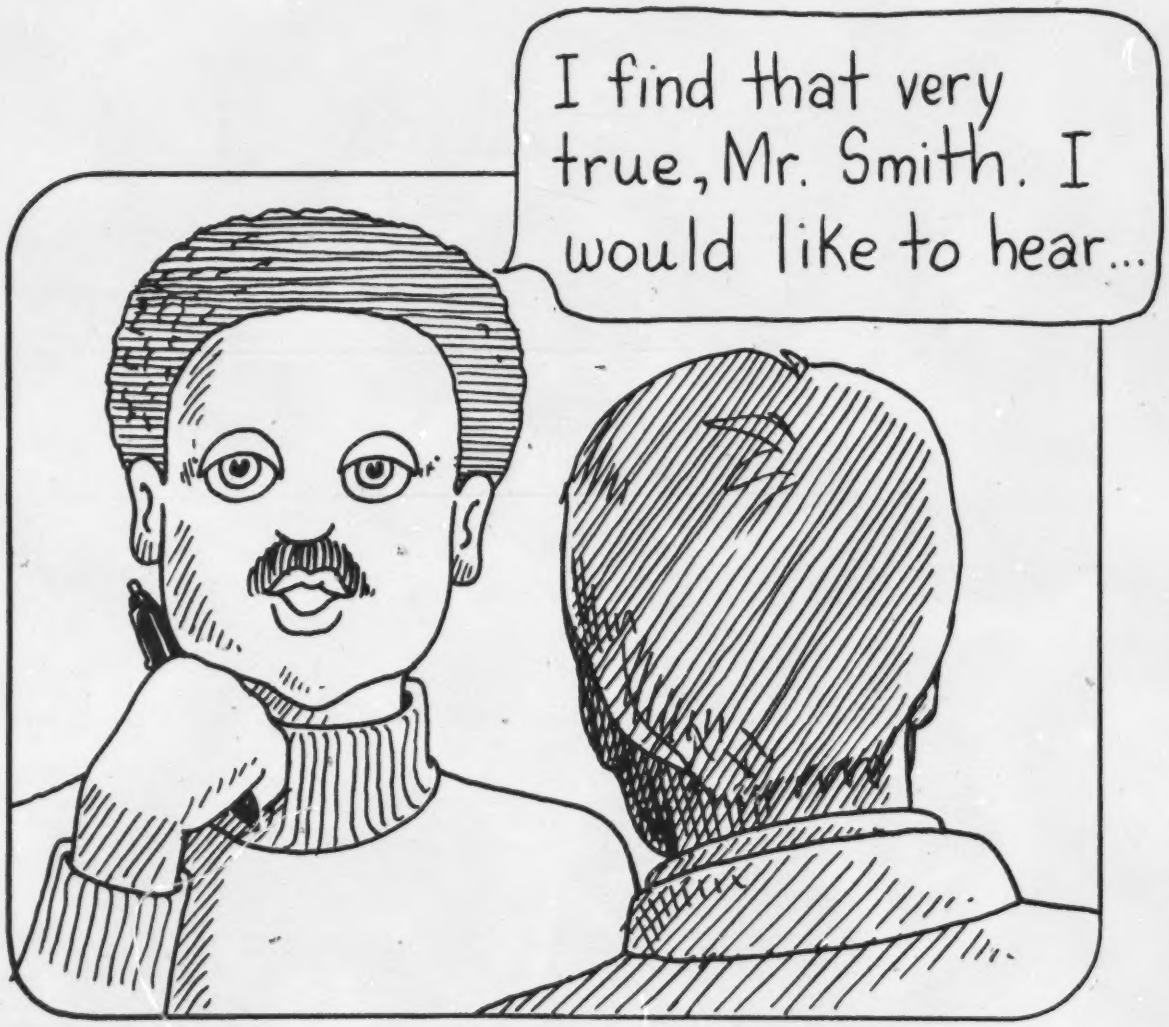
QUESTIONING:

The type of questions to ask are leading questions rather than questions that require only a yes or no response. Leading questions facilitate conversation. Any question can be made into a leading question simply by phrasing it so that it cannot be answered by yes or no. Examples of leading questions are:

"What do you enjoy most about caring for your children?"
"What seems most difficult?"
"How much help do you have in caring for the children?"
"What was your child like as an infant?"
"How does your child occupy his/her time at home?"
"How do things go when he/she is with other children the same age?"
"What do you want out of life for your child?"
"What will it take for him/her to reach that goal?"
"What kind of help will be needed?"
"What do you think would happen if_____ ?"
"What does he/she do when _____ ?"
"How do you handle_____?"

DISCUSSING RELEVANT MATTERS:

An important factor to remember when commenting on what the parents have said is to lead them to discuss relevant matters. Your comments should also be reassuring and encouraging. Great care must be given to the manner in which you express and communicate your meaning. Your tone and inflection are very important. Parents must not only understand what you say but, also, what you mean.



HANDLING PERSONAL QUESTIONS:

Do not be taken by surprise if the parents ask personal questions. There are four possible reasons that personal questions may be asked.

1. They may be attempting to change the subject of the discussion.
2. They may believe that asking a personal question is the polite and social thing to do.
3. They may be showing a natural curiosity.
4. They may be testing their preconceived notions about your personality.

Personal questions should be answered truthfully, though succinctly, and should be followed by an immediate redirection.

HANDLING PERSONAL QUESTIONS:

Be wary of introducing your personal interests to find something in common with the parents in order to help them feel relaxed. This introduction of personal opinions or feelings may have the effect of taking the relationship beyond the professional level.

LEADERSHIP/DIRECTION/REDIRECTION:

You must maintain control throughout the discussion and be ready to direct/redirect the conversation. Factors that may indicate a need for direction include the parents rambling on during the discussion and parental discussion in an area not related to immediate problems. Situations involving parents who are emotionally upset or dwell on disturbing materials require your leadership in redirecting the conversation to the subject matter of the original line of discussion. Keep in mind that this undirected expression can encourage feelings or problems that neither you nor the parents are able to handle.

LEADERSHIP/DIRECTION/REDIRECTION:

Be sure not to allow parents to reveal "too much." Parents revealing "too much" may exhibit subsequent anxiety. After a "confessional" session, parents may become withdrawn, inarticulate, hostile, guilty, or depressed.

LEADERSHIP/DIRECTION/REDIRECTION:

During the discussion, the teacher may decide the conversation is off track or that more information is needed about a previous topic. This calls for a redirection which may be stated simply as, "I was interested in the comment that you made a few minutes ago about _____ . Would you please tell me more about that?" This lets the parents know you are interested and listening to what they are saying while at the same time getting the discussion back on track.

ENDING THE CONVERSATION:

Monitor the time during the conference. About ten minutes before the end of the allotted time, say something like, "I see we only have about ten minutes left, and I think we have really gotten to the heart of our concerns." At this point, it is time to summarize what has been said and what action you and the parents will take. One way of doing this is to write out a plan of action. This plan should contain the activities each party will perform and a timeline for these activities. As a further follow-up activity, send a letter to the parents summarizing the results of the meeting and thanking them for coming.

Consult a counseling expert such as a psychologist, guidance counselor, or pupil personnel worker, if specific problems arise. Remember that effective communication must precede involvement of parents in programming and in capitalizing on their great potential as agents of change.

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